Involving child and youth advisors in academic research about child participation

Involving Child and Youth Advisors in Academic Research about Child Participation: The Child and Youth Advisory Committees of the International and Canadian Child Rights Partnership

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Abstract

Nearly thirty years ago, the world recognised the participation rights of children with the adoption by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Since then childhood researchers in the Global South and Global North have been at the forefront of promoting these rights. The increased involvement of children and youth in research has challenged 'traditional' adult research practices in numerous ways. This article explores the role and contributions of Child and Youth Advisory Committees (CYACs) in the research process. It discusses the establishment of CYACs and how they supported the International and Canadian Child Rights Partnership (ICCRP). The ICCRP began as a three-year multi-country research project addressing children's rights to participation and protection and monitoring this connection internationally within several Global South and North countries: Brazil, Canada, China and South Africa. This article describes the creation and functioning of the ICCRP CYACs and the strengths, challenges, and creative processes in implementation. Findings presented relate to ethics regulation, differing expectations and assumptions about CYAC involvement, and virtual communication. These are discussed with the inclusion of adult researchers' and the CYAC members' perspectives. The article shares lessons learned about the role and significance of dialogue to support other child and youth advisory bodies in research at the local and global levels.

Keywords: children, participation, child rights, children in research, child and youth advisory

Highlights

- Opening up dialogue with children and youth can add to research and support participation.
- Young people's advisory groups contribute a valuable ethical dimension to research practice.
- Institutional ethics requirements can create challenges for ethical practice with children.
- Young people and adults may have differing expectations of the role and process of advisory groups.
- Virtual communications can facilitate dialogue, but have limitations in the Global South.

1. Introduction

Thirty years ago, the world recognized children's participation rights with the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). Since then, a host of researchers in the Global South and Global North[1] have been at the forefront of promoting these rights, seeking to ensure that children and youth's] experiences and perspectives are included in matters that affect them (see Kellett 2010; Spyrou, 2018). A substantial body of research has emerged involving children and youth as research participants themselves, rather than relying on parents, carers or other adults as proxies, and developing research designs and ethical ways of research that seek to respect and recognize children's contributions to address research questions (see Alderson & Morrow, 2011). A smaller but growing research trend involves children and youth in other aspects of the research process, from advising research studies as expert consultants, to analysing data as part of the research team, to child and youth-led research (Ergler, 2017). Such intensive participation has provided new challenges and dilemmas, including questions about knowledge and scientific rigour, equitable partnerships, methodologies and working patterns, ethical responsibilities, and remuneration (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor 2015; Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall 2019).

This article arises from a collaborative research project – undertaken by the International and Canadian Child Rights Partnership (hereafter ICCRP) – that sought to recognise children and youth's expertise and participation rights, by creating a cross-national committee to advise the project. A group of children and youth from Brazil, Canada, China, and South Africa were recruited to advise the project throughout its three years. Despite the commitment and widespread experiences of the ICCRP adult members in involving children and youth in research, the complexities of involving children and youth virtually and across countries proved testing. The purpose of this research is to explore the role and contributions of Child and Youth Advisory Committees (CYACs) in the research process. The learning from these complexities, reflected upon by ICCRP members (children, young people and adults), has led to this article. The article speaks to emerging and on-going debates in the research methods and childhood literatures, about how to marry ethical regulations and practice with co-production[3] (e.g. Houghton, 2015), the need to recognize children and youth's own project journeys (e.g. Oliveras, Cluver, Bernays, & Armstrong, 2018), and how to ensure mutual learning between those in the Global South and the Global North (e.g. Tisdall & Punch 2012; Twum-Danso Imoh, 2019).

2. Literature Review: children and youth's Participation in Research

The UNCRC specifies a number of participation rights for children and youth. These include freedom of expression (Article 13), freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 14),

freedom of association (Article 15), protection of privacy (Article 16) and access to information (Article 17). Recognised as a General Principle by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Article 12(1) is the most cited:

> States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

As further developed in its General Comment on Article 12, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) specifies that the right is not discretionary, it applies widely and to all children, a child needs to be supported by information to participate, and the child's views must be considered seriously. The child's right includes decisions about their own individual lives, as well as collective decision-making whether in their families, services or communities.

While participation is a commonly used term in the children's rights field, it is not a term found in the UNCRC itself. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) provides some definition in their General Comment:

> This term has evolved and is now widely used to describe ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes. (p. 3)

This definition implicitly addresses many of the challenges experienced in children and youth's participation in practice. Research and commentary documents a host of challenges (see Caputo, 2017; Collins, 2017; Fylkesnes, Taylor, & Iversen, 2018; Lundy, 2018). These range from children and youth's involvement being tokenistic and having little impact on decisions, to concerns about which children and youth are involved, how representative they are and who is excluded. The list is extensive and with considerable similarities across socio-economic and geographical contexts (see Murray, 2010).

If ensuring children and youth's participation rights are met generally is challenging, so too is ensuring children and youth's participation rights are realized in research (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Kellett 2010). Debates continue about children's involvement as research participants: from how to conceptualize and practice informed consent, balancing the protection of children while supporting their participation, and how to consider intergenerational relationships of power between adult researchers and child participants (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Kellett 2010; McCarry, 2011). The debates only grow as children and youth are increasingly involved in all research stages, from research design to fieldwork to knowledge exchange. More fundamentally, involving children and youth deeply in research processes test 'traditional' adult research practices in numerous ways, including claims to knowledge and scientific rigour, legitimacy and credibility, authorship and ownership, and ethical regulation and standards (see Hammersley, 2017; Spyrou, 2017; Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019).

A particular form of participation has recognized children and youth's expertise as research advisors (Arunkumar et al. 2019; McDonagh & Bateman, 2011; Moore, Noble-Carr, & McArthur, 2016; Lundy, 2018). The literature outlines the benefits of child and youth advisory groups, such as their assistance in specifying important topics for young people, sharing insights and experiences within their jurisdiction, providing useful advice to ensure engaging and effective methods, and identifying key findings, recommendations and means to disseminate (e.g. Jones et al., 2018; McDonagh & Bateman, 2012; Moore et al., 2016; Oliveras et al., 2018).

This experience identifies particular dilemmas for ethical regulation and practice. While a criticism of participatory research projects often relates to young people being uninvolved in the pre-planning stages, institutional requirements can preclude the involvement of children until after ethical approval has been gained (Moore et al., 2016). Even then, this is not necessarily straightforward. Researchers have reported at times that ethics committees appear overly risk-averse, inconsistent and have different perceptions to researchers of children's vulnerability and competency for research participation (Hildebrand et al., 2015; Powell & Smith, 2009). Further, participation requires ongoing attention as, even with approval, ethical considerations can arise at any stage. Researchers working with child and youth advisory groups report the emergence of issues related to power, consent, sharing of data, and the nature of the research subject matter and members' response to it (Jones et al., 2018; McCarry, 2011; Moore et al., 2016). Drawing on experiences of activities with children and youth living with and affected by HIV in Africa and globally, Oliveras et al. (2018) have co-developed with the young people a new agenda that sets out basic requirements for engaging young people in guiding research and policy. In short, they state, "participation is essential, and should be Resourced, Impactful, Genuine, Harmless, Teen friendly, and Skills building (RIGHTS)" (p.S29). Underpinning this acronym are the need to address the resources required to support meaningful children and youth's participation, the recognition that children and youth should be recognized, rewarded and remunerated for their time, and that their participation needs to impact on the research and its results.

Such ethical considerations gain an extra complexity when working cross-nationally. There is a risk, for example, that ethical guidelines developed in the Global North are imposed on the Global South without due consideration of context or alternative approaches (Abebe & Bessell, 2014) including for instance the availability of professional psycho-social support services. Increasingly, the childhood research field is being challenged to include both the Global South and the Global North in dialogue (Twum-Danso Imoh, 2019; Punch, 2016) and to incorporate anti-colonial and post-colonial theory (Balagopalan, 2018; Hanson, Abebe, Aitken, Balagopalan, & Punch, 2018). Anti-colonial theory critiques ongoing realities of colonized people and explores what other possibilities exist: perspectives and experiences of those subordinated through colonization (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001). Dei and Asgharzadeh (2001) define colonial as "all forms of dominating and oppressive relationships that emerge from structures of power and privilege inherent and embedded in our contemporary social relations" (p. 308). Given the ICCRP is ambitiously working within and across Brazil, Canada, China and South Africa, attention needs to be paid to the ethical and practical implications of such theorisation.

The UNCRC has galvanized a stream of research that seeks to recognize children and youth's participation rights. This research has not been immune to the challenges faced by participation, policy, and practice, more generally. Accumulated experiences have pointed to the benefits of children and youth's involvement, including improved research questions and methodologies, as well as the challenges faced in such areas as ethical regulation, knowledge production and recognition. These challenges have additional salience for a partnership that is working intergenerationally and cross-nationally with an anti-colonial and children's rights perspective.

3. Material and Methods: The International and Canadian Child Rights Partnership (ICCRP) and Its Child and Youth Advisory Committee (CYAC)

A partnership involving children, young people, practitioners and academics, the ICCRP emerged from a 2015 conference, in which a need was identified to explore how children's participation in international child protection programs and policies could be monitored. The ICCRP was successful in obtaining funding for a three-year research project, from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) (Canada). Additionally, UNICEF South Africa supported the South African case study.

3.1 Source of Data

The ICCRP project has three phases.[4] Phase I involved establishing the International Child and Youth Advisory Committee (CYAC), literature reviews in Portuguese, Spanish and English, and interviews with international experts in 2017. From late 2017 to 2018, Phase II involved in-depth investigations of how to monitor children's participation in particular international child protection activities, in sites within Brazil, Canada (two sites), China, and South Africa, selected due to the involvement of researchers and partner organizations. Studies considered the topics of: participation on the state council on children's rights; involving young people in Child and Youth Care college curricula development; the youth voice committee for a provincial harm reduction strategy; building and strengthening child protection system; and assessing a national Adolescent and Youth Development Programme, respectively. Currently, as of 2019, the ICCRP is in Phase III, which is focused on incorporating learning from Phases I and II, undertaking knowledge exchange, and identifying next steps.

3.2 Participants

The project developed both international and local CYACs. The international CYAC has so far involved 14 children and youth over two and a half years, with a membership at any one time of 10. Male and female members were recruited from country fieldwork sites, and local ICCRP-affiliated research projects with the youngest child being 10 years old and others up to 24 years old. Thus, the children and youth members involved in the CYACs have ranged in age from 10 to 24 years at the time of recruitment to reflect the definitions of "child" from the UNCRC (all those under 18), and "youth" from the United Nations (n.d.) (all those between 15 to 24 years of age). . The aim was realised to include two children and/or young people from each country (and four from Canada where there were two fieldwork sites). In addition to the aforementioned age range, the recruitment criteria were: an interest in child rights, including child participation and protection. Invitations were extended through partner organisations to children and youth to voluntarily join the CYAC. Selection was not a competitive process, but the result of interest and

meeting engagement. It is worth noting that most of the research assistants qualify as youth and participate in CYAC meetings. Before recruitment, fulsome ethical applications were made, with approval gained, in all the academic partner universities, covering a substantial number of issues from safeguarding to informed consent to anonymity (see findings section for further discussion).

3.3 Setting

In Phase II of the research, the intention was to establish local CYACs to inform the in-depth investigations in each of the five sites. This objective was not realized in China, where service changes created time pressures to undertake participatory research activities while participants were still available.[5] Local CYACs were established in the other four sites, engaging with findings from Phase I in order to inform Phase II, and advising on research questions, methods, ethics and learning. One of the international CYAC members served on each of the local CYACs, to bridge experience and knowledge about the overall project.

3.4 Sources of Data

The international CYAC meetings are held every two months, with 15 meetings having taken place thus far. Local CYAC meetings were generally held one or two times in each jurisdiction during Phase II. Additionally, CYAC members participated in meetings outside of the bi-monthly meetings for various topics such as this CYAC paper, country studies, and conferences. At the international level, all meetings are virtual, using internet technology, while some local CYAC meetings were held in person. At the beginning of the ICCRP efforts, the first meeting agenda reflected the direction from adult facilitators (e.g. project information) but from the first meeting onwards and increasingly over time, power structures shifted, which led to CYAC members suggesting and creating agenda items. CYAC members' advice and recommendations for the ICCRP are anonymously noted during every meeting to respect their confidentiality. The notes are then shared with the CYAC and adult researchers. The adult researchers discuss the CYAC input and how it will be incorporated, and provide feedback to the CYAC about how their advice and recommendations have influenced project development. There are opportunities for the CYAC to address or clarify their concerns or questions on a regular basis in their meetings and emails with the research team. CYAC members have chosen to lead various aspects of the meetings. Where invited by the CYAC, adult researchers engage in the meetings to share ideas and learn from the CYAC. CYAC members have participated in the “adult” research team meetings, although as discussed below this has not been popular. To date, the CYAC has refined and added questions to interview schedules, guided the selection and implementation of participatory activities during data collection, individual members have contributed to presentations and workshops, and reflected on emerging findings.

3.5 Analysis of Data

As with other articles on child and youth advisory groups (see Moore et al., 2016; Oliveras et al., 2018), the methodology for this article was undertaken systematically but not as a conventional research project. More akin to participatory action research, the emphasis is on collective inquiry and experimentation, followed by reflection and change (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The anonymised meeting notes and other documents, such as

presentation slides and briefings were collected on the project's secure online drive. CYAC members were invited to give feedback on their experiences at a collective meeting or individually: their comments were then transcribed. For this article, researchers have separately and then together considered all this information, undertaking thematic coding (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012) to identify key themes. These became the basis for the article, with the selected findings then shared with the larger team for comments and amendments. To ensure CYAC members were given due prominence, their views on the findings are directly provided below.

The ICCRP decided to begin the CYAC process and view it as a pilot, with a commitment to monitoring, review, and development, rather than be stymied by all the potential difficulties (see Lundy, 2018). Below are key learnings to date, based on the collated observations, documents and collaborative reflections of CYAC members and academic partners. These are presented under three themes, of **ethical regulation**, **children and youth's own project journeys**, and **the implications of the virtual, the international and the local**.

4. Results: Key Learnings to Date

The ICCRP's ambition for an international CYAC posed complex challenges, aligned with some of the inherent challenges identified in extant literature (see Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015). Themes that are familiar to more localised groups were amplified by the challenges of working across time zones, languages, and contexts. Three of these themes are discussed below, including expressed views of the CYAC members and theoretical considerations.

4.1 Theme I: Participation in Practice – Ethical Regulation

There is now a considerable body of literature focused on ethical considerations related to children and youth's participation in research (see Graham, Powell, Tayler, Anderson, & Fitzgerald, 2013), with particular challenges and complexities evident in relation to young people's involvement in advisory groups (Jones, Mercieca, & Munday, 2018; McCarry, 2011; Moore et al., 2016). Such challenges were encountered in the ICCRP project, in relation to institutional ethical regulatory requirements prior to and during the process of CYAC involvement.

At the outset, the project was caught in the all-too-familiar quandary of meeting regulatory requirements for academic research while developing research premised on genuine co-production. The ICCRP was faced with the challenges inherent in navigating such initial tensions, in research that had flexible and open-ended stages, where funding was prospective at best, team composition was still evolving, research design was to be decided and unanticipated dissemination identified. Intensive contributions had been made by children and youth from Ontario during the 2015 International Child Protection Network of Canada conference (funded by SSHRC), which influenced the bid for ICCRP. One young person from the conference contributed to the proposal development and became the first ICCRP Child and Youth Participation Coordinator.[1] However, children and youth from all the partner countries

[1] The Coordinator is a key member of the ICCRP to facilitate CYAC participation in all ICCRP efforts.

were not involved in devising the proposal when the adult researchers applied for funding. Consequently, the project essentially developed without significant dialogue with children and youth in the initial phase, and led to the recognition that children and youth needed to be engaged more actively moving forward.

The requirement for ethical approval prior to young people's involvement was a factor significantly delaying the engageement of children and youth. Ethical approval from academic and partner institutions is generally required for children and youthparticipation in research and is critically important - to safeguard children and to assure stakeholders that the research project has been subject to ethical review and complied with regulatory requirements at the outset (Powell et al., 2019). This critical step proved to be another challenge for the ICCRP. Ethical approval was sought from all six participating academic institutions, with the requirements from some particularly gruelling, involving extensive paperwork and subsequent revisions, which then required further agreement across all institutions. The first round of institutional ethical review, for the initial establishment of the international CYAC, took six months. A second round of ethical amendments was subsequently required, to ensure continuation of the CYAC's influence and engagement with Phase II of the project, which took another three months. While critically important, the requirement for ethical approval prior to children's participation as advisors or participants, resulted in considerable delay to children's involvement in the research. Consequently, consideration of key ethical concerns, such as informed consent and power dynamics within and across geographies was also delayed.

4.1.1 Views of CYAC about ethics regulations.

The CYAC were critical of some of the conditions needed to meet institutional ethical requirements, particularly around the procedures pertaining to **informed consent**. The South African CYAC, for example, found the consent form to be lengthy and too complex to elicit meaningful consent from children and youth. We had not anticipated this, indeed we had tested the readability of the consent form using an online Flesch kincaid grade level test that indicated that it was suitable for grade 8 learners. The team had not thought to test the form, and the criticism emerged during a workshop to get input on the participatory activities for the planned fieldwork. For instance, the partnership decided to use a game called *Pots and Stones* from the Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluation Children's Participation (Lansdown & O'Kane, 2014, p. 36-38). The game involves young people rating the extent to which the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's (2009) nine principles for meaningful participation apply in their context. When they were engaging with the *pots and stones* activity, several young people raised concerns about the written instructions and the explanation of the 9 requirements for the child's right to be heard in processes. As part of the engagement with the exercise they translated "transparent and informative" as "it must be clear, it must be understandable" and challenged the team to apply those principles to our workshop. During the discussion, it emerged that consent form was "too long" and despite the accompanying infographics that most youth would just sign it without reading or understanding it. The group agreed that the shorter checklist was clear. The form had received ethical clearance, by six Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) after intense scrutiny of the wording. To revise and resubmit the form for ethical review would have led to further delays.

As the wording of the consent form could not be changed, the CYAC advised creative changes to the process of obtaining consent that made the form comprehensible. Working in partnership, the adult researchers and the CYAC created a series of activities, games, and interactive sessions to explain the key concepts.
This enabled young people to understand what they were agreeing to. Similarly, the research tools were adapted by the adult researchers working with the CYAC for the South African young people. The South African CYAC helped to translate the principles into youth-friendly language, then into isiXhosa, to shift to an innovative, culturally appropriate, accessible, and respectful framing, and finally, they created a short video based on the document they had developed. Such developments arose out of dialogue between the CYAC and adult researchers, which enabled attention to ethical considerations, in the face of rigid ethical regulations.

4.1.2 Applying learning to practice.

While the ethical regulatory bodies are undoubtedly guided by strong principles, some of the requirements did not uphold children's rights to participate in practice. In essence, institutional ethical regulatory bodies can intend to support respectful research but their requirements may dominate, oppress, and overwhelm researchers and advisors, research processes and participants based on power and privilege inherent in present-day academic structures. As a result of dialogue between the ICCRP members and the CYAC, the project upheld both the requirements of all six IRBs and the rights of children and youth, to make the research accessible and truly meet the principles of ethical research (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Ruiz-Casares & Oates, 2018).

The importance of children and youth being involved at an early stage of the research process was highlighted. This included them being involved in shaping the ways in which ethical considerations were attended to and regulations were met, such as development of information tools, consent forms and operational strategy, while ensuring avoidance of bias. Consent is increasingly viewed as an ongoing process (see Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Graham et al., 2013), in which provision of information and formal indication of consent, is accompanied by participant understanding of the information, openings for choice and disagreement, ongoing negotiation and reaffirming children's consent at the end of the research (Moore, McArthur & Noble-Carr, 2018). Creative, child and youth friendly methodology and ethics need to be, not only age-appropriate, but also guided by the country and cultural context of the young person. In South Africa, for example, in 2016, 78% of children could not read for meaning in any language after four/five years of primary school (Howie, Combrinck, Roux, Mokoena, & Palane, 2017). Consequently, lengthy, complex consent forms were unlikely to truly support informed consent, without additional creative explanations. We have learned about the importance of being creative through open intergenerational dialogue to respond to this challenge of ethics regulation in order to dismantle power constructs that impede children and youth's agency and power. This is critical in research partnerships, to support more balanced and respectful relationships, particularly with those marginalized by oppressive structures.

4.2 Theme II: Participation in Practice – children and youth's Own Project Journeys

The international CYAC started meeting virtually in May 2017, typically with only one or two of the researchers joining. The first full meeting, including all of the CYAC members and adult researchers, took place a year later in February 2018. At this time, differences in expectations and aspirations of the CYAC and the adult researchers became apparent. Adult researchers were challenged by the CYAC regarding how the child and youth advisory committees would function and what they would address.

Firstly, as child and youth participation advocates, the adult researchers hoped to engage directly with the CYAC members to influence the project. However, the adult researchers questioned whether they had engaged the CYAC members sufficiently in meetings and key decisions. The feedback, views and interests of the CYAC members enabled adult researchers to recognise that the CYAC preferred to meet in their own space and at times when they could engage with one another with greater ease, separate from regular ongoing monthly adult meetings, agendas and decisions. Along with these meetings, the CYAC members and adult researchers came together effectively, with the productive joint presentations for dissemination of research outcomes at several international conferences in 2018 and 2019.

Secondly, the CYAC members challenged the adult researchers' preoccupations about the purpose of these committees. As noted above, ethical regulation requirements meant that the initial CYAC remit was largely decided by the adult researchers, who placed emphasis on the CYAC advising key decisions for the research project. However, feedback indicated that this clearly differed from the expectations of the CYAC members, as outlined below.

4.2.1 Views of CYAC members reflecting on their own journey.

Although children share some similar everyday experiences because of intergenerational ordering that positions them as subordinate to adults (Alanen, 2001), this is where their shared social experience can sometimes end, recognizing their diverse intersectional identities. As such, time for relational development across intersectionalities was pertinent. The CYAC clearly expressed the need for more time to get to know one another and the adult team members. They identified some initial disappointment about 'research' being the primary focus and some reported *"feeling bored and feeling they had little to contribute",* with no interest in joining research team meetings again. A Chinese CYAC member expressed that "meetings involving children shall not be as tight and serious as adults' meeting". This contrasted with CYAC members' excitement about participation that involved linking up with others across the globe. They were interested in learning about each other's context and realities, and sharing their knowledge and insights regarding children's rights within their countries and regions. During these sessions, the young people made connections about the similarities and differences in the challenges that children face. Mayara, a Brazilian CYAC member exemplifies this view:

> The theme of diversity is important. We see people creating a group from different backgrounds like we are, and the focus is often on creating a homogenous group: discarding the differences and only looking for the similarities. If we address our differences too, we can achieve much more interesting and valuable work. Therefore, it is easy to see how powerful this type of work (ICCRP) is. We connect and celebrate our diversity.

> Our differences make each country's case unique. Our work is not about one country defining child participation and protection in Brazil, Canada, South Africa and China. Rather, it is about exploring what child participation and protection look like in each country in order to learn from one another. Intersectionality, I love that word. It sums up my point.

Cleyton,[6] a Brazilian CYAC member, expresses his interest in the CYAC:

> When I first heard about the project, I was attracted to the opportunity to learn and hear about international view and compare on participation in different countries. It has been great. My expertise on living in a community where there are lots of poverty contributes to the research. From my experience, I have an understanding of how to work together locally.

All CYAC members emphasized their sense of curiosity as an element that drew them into the research. As other studies have found, they appreciated the opportunity to enhance their knowledge and skills through participation in the advisory group (see Lundy & McEvoy, 2012; Moore et al., 2016). Jessica from Canada shared:

> The participatory meeting experience [involving CYAC members, other young people, and adults] was very interesting for me, as I started to develop my own sense of leadership and leadership skills. Before, I did not know if that was something I could do; stand up in front of everyone and share my opinion. I am growing, because of the CYAC.

Zukhanye from South Africa stated: “I got a chance to experience how participation feels like. Through my participation, I have gained more knowledge and skills.” Similarly, one Chinese CYAC member expressed:

> I want to know the development situation of children in other countries through this meeting, especially their right to participation and right to speech. I do not know if the children in other countries are like us facing many troubles in the process of growing up. Our ideas are not concerned and valued by adults or society, because we are children. More importantly, I want to learn how to get the attention of adults and society of child participation and what kind of methods can be used to effectively make the whole society realize that child is also an important member of the society, as the growth of children is an important part of development in society. Children’s voices must be heard and our ideas must be valued.

Another Chinese CYAC member shared: “I always have one question: are children in all countries discriminated against? It seems as though most countries are like this. Why should we be divided into two categories, children and adults? This clearly demonstrates inequality.”

4.2.2 Applying learning to practice.

Dialogue with the CYAC members and recognition of the differing expectations of researchers and CYAC members influenced the research agenda. Given the participation goals of the project, it became clear that the expectations and aspirations of the CYAC needed to be

acknowledged, accepted, and addressed, in order to truly ensure meaningful participation and partnership. The feedback challenged adult researchers' assumptions and supported them to identify, together with the CYAC, spaces for co-working and collaboration.

Learning that the CYAC members were interested in developing their own knowledge (for example, about children's rights) and learning from each other, resulted in an adaptation whereby every subsequent meeting involved exchanges between international CYAC members. Prior to the second ICCRP meeting, all team members – both CYAC and adult researchers - shared their biographies including photos, drawings, and details of their country. Not only did this satisfy the young people's desire to know each other better, the process helped restructure power imbalances that can be prevalent between adult researchers and young people. It also helped to augment the recognition of a "common humanness" of peoples (Dei, 2012). It showed that young people had influence over the agenda, but also fostered human-to-human connection. Thereafter, meetings began and ended with cultural greetings, including interactive culturally diverse icebreakers and music, to learn more about – and respect – each other's cultures, and feel comfortable with one another. Such playful encounters can support children, young people, and adults to begin to "peel off their game face and freely express" themselves in new spaces (Kolb & Kolb, 2010, p. 44). Aligned with extant literature, this suggested the need to tailor participation appropriately in different spaces and at different times, rather than assuming that being co-located and co-temperous was 'ideal' (Cornwall, 2008; Tisdall, 2015).

CYAC members identified how their understandings of participation are informed by their ICCRP experiences. For example, Mayara from Brazil identified:

> "we are being heard. We see the fruits of what we are working on. We see that we are being part of it. It is difficult for us to be heard, because before it was because we were too young. And now that we are in university, we are only university students. So we do not feel always like we can be part of the discussion. Being part of the CYAC allowed us to be heard, co-write papers, and attend conferences and more. We are being heard about what we have to contribute…[at gatherings with the adult researchers] with all the researchers I felt so comfortable. I never felt like I was less. This is important, if you don't feel like you belong, you do not feel comfortable to participate."

Cleyton from Brazil concurred:

> "When I started being part of the ICCRP and CYAC projects, I had no idea about child participation and child rights etc. At the same time that I learned a lot, I contributed a lot. I think this is really important because...when we have this kind of space, we see our contribution and participation in the final results...our names and voices and opinions are being expressed completely, even if we are only just students or young people. It is really important. I think it is kind of constructing me as a person, as someone who has an interest in child rights and child participation."

Through the experiences and contributions of the CYAC members, young people have an opportunity to contribute not only to the ICCRP project but to their personal lives. In the CYAC meetings, young people are able to reflect on their own journey, development, outcomes, and learn from one another.

4.3 Theme III: Participation in Practice – The Virtual, the Local, and the International
Considerable challenges were faced working with a diverse group of young people in the international CYAC, particularly in relation to language and communication. Recruitment was challenging, at times, as the ICCRP was looking for English-speaking young people from each of the four countries. With this particular 'requirement', based on practicalities associated with ease of communication, the ICCRP is critically reflexive of the colonial imposition of English that contradicts the project's anticolonial framing as well as cognizant of practical and resource limitations. Explorations with local CYACs sought ways to address impositions of dominant language and practices that could impede young people's engagement. It was decided not to use interpreters in order to have the virtual space be predominantly children and youth who could engage collaboratively without adult roles affecting their abilities to communicate freely.

Even with a shared language, the research and thematic terminology proved challenging as participants' understanding of English varied greatly. At the very first meeting, for example, one of the older CYAC members referred to "qualitative and quantitative methods" when reflecting on the research outline. Two other members (15 and 17 years of age) had never heard of these terms and did not understand them. Consequently, the conversation was disrupted as these young people felt undermined, even though the adult researcher explained the terminology. To resolve this problem and ensure equal participation, the concept of a "Jargon Buster" was introduced, which enabled CYAC members to stop the conversation every time jargon was used. A glossary was made of these jargon words, which was distributed with all the research materials for young people. Over time, researchers and CYAC members have adapted and use simpler terms, but when new members join the CYAC the Jargon Buster is revived.

Lessons were learnt about the limitations of virtual communication as well. Presumptions about the global reach of the internet and the advanced abilities of young people to access it (see Martin & Stuart, 2011) were belied by the CYAC experience. Additional planning, time and resources were needed to involve children in certain areas. In rural South Africa, for example, where internet access is very limited, the ICCRP researchers had to fly and drive to CYAC members. Meaningful participation in virtual meetings was dependent on receiving documents in advance and in South Africa this information could not be sent electronically via email and had to be couriered or posted. This impacted on the project in many ways – monthly meetings were not possible, as a three-week lead time was needed to distribute copies to participants. All the input had to be captured verbally during the CYAC meetings, or face-to-face with a research assistant, adding significant costs to the team. The time, effort, and cost of involving rural children in South Africa was worthwhile, but extensive, and disproportionate to the time and money used for the youth in, for example, Canada.

There were other challenges, even in areas with more stable internet access. While Facebook pages can be used to foster relationships through communication and sharing photos and stories, Facebook is banned in China. This is aside from the Facebook age requirements, which would not permit a shared private online group space with CYAC members as young as 10.

Furthermore, shared Google documents were not accessible by Chinese colleagues. Thus, the project relied heavily on voice notes and short YouTube style videos to overcome language and literacy barriers.

4.3.1 Views of CYAC members about their engagement in virtual, local and international contexts.

The CYAC members provided rich insights about how virtual communications were not only feasible across geographies and time zones, but also valued contributions to this international research project. They generally describe feelings of inclusion, feeling valued and appreciated, recognizing the challenges of language in research project documentation and meetings including (but not restricted to) the use of English as second- or additional language ability. As Zukhanye from South Africa expressed:

> Language can still be a challenge when participating, especially for those whose first language is not English. This refers both to meetings and project documents. In phase II to participate, share knowledge and opinions, to learn from future meetings and focus groups and to continue developing.

Additionally, Mayara from Brazil shared, “English is my second language. Sometimes, my translation gets lost while I am speaking. It is helpful for me to talk to other CYAC members in order to learn in collaboration on certain English words, and help each other.”

However, members also identified that clear communication supported ongoing and sustainable engagement in the research process, and helped clarify expectations for both CYAC members and the adult researchers. CYAC members also identified the importance of being supported by their peers on the committee. Haley from Canada shared:

> One of the things that allows me to stay engaged is when there is very clear communication. That has always been very helpful for me. I’ve never questioned what the expectations were of myself. If I wanted to become more involved, all I had to do was just express that interest and it was always supported. Any extra engagement that I offered was always ensured by others that it was sustainable and very clearly appreciated. There was validation and peer support and clear communication.

Moreover, Cleyton shared his appreciation of virtual communication as a key mode of self-expression for many young people in Brazil: “The internet for example is a good place for them to express their opinion. I feel like often there are spaces to say things but it is not necessarily heard by other people.” The internet allowed young people to be heard and contribute as members of the ICCRP.

Overall, CYAC members were passionate about their engagement and appreciated being part of and working with a team internationally. Ongoing communication and updates through different mediums was appreciated.

4.3.2 Applying learning to practice.

Despite the above challenges, creative and innovative strategies were adapted to facilitate and enhance communication – at local, international and virtual platforms – with significant contributions from the CYAC members. While the 'easier' option, in light of the constrictions of dominant structures, might be to disengage from child and youth participation due to the complex time and resource demands, the ICCRP sought to persevere against power impositions to ensure that child and youth participation and pressures were foregrounded in the values and practices of ICCRP processes. User-friendly documentation, such as glossaries of key terms and demystified research and rights-based language jargon, created opportunities for both CYAC members and the adult researchers to develop shared understandings of core terms and processes. These findings are consistent with the literature about the importance of using language and processes that reflect young people's ages and stages of cognitive and emotional development, best interests, language usage and subjective perspective (Ruiz-Casares, Collins, Tisdall, & Grover, 2017; Sammon et al, 2015).

Virtual communication allows for international interaction and collaboration, and relieves some of the geographical restrictions traditionally faced by qualitative researchers engaging with children and youth (Heath, Brooks, Cleaver, & Ireland, 2009; Martin & Stuart, 2011). However, barriers with respect to communication, especially virtual connectivity need to be recognised and addressed. Even with great enthusiasm and expertise in child participation among all partners, power dynamics are evident in the imposition of expectations and adult-driven roles in supporting their online participation. This was heightened for young people with less accessibility to virtual spaces and, due to age discrimination in ethics regulations, less able to engage without adult conduits. However, many of the CYAC members highlighted their limited time and availability, and the value of the adult conduits in providing the support necessary to actively contribute their ideas effectively. The virtual possibilities of the international team were attractive logistically and the international interchange was immensely valued by the CYAC members, but the virtual platform was not a panacea and the 'digital divide' meant that not all CYAC members had equal access. Additional costs (including flights, petrol, and cellular phone data) need to be factored into funding proposals for researchers wishing to include young people, especially those from poor rural communities and/or with limited infrastructure, to give these children equal access and voice.

5. Conclusions

As recognised in the UNCRC and further developed by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in its General Comment on Article 12 (2009), children have a right to participate in all decisions and actions that affect them. Accordingly, this includes participation in the design, implementation and analysis of research. This article contributes to the growing body of literature focused on the participation of children and youth in research in advisory roles (Jones et al. 2018; McCarry, 2011; Moore et al. 2016) and, in doing so, extends the international dialogue about wise practices, new innovations and ethical considerations for meaningful participation of children and youth in research processes across different contexts in both the Global South and North.

A key question for the partnership and other researchers centres on what 'meaningful' participation means. In the ICCRP project, the importance of *dialogue* among all involved in the research, and across multiple spaces, was highlighted. This included hosting separate dialogues to support the international and local research teams. Working across the globe meant dealing with large inequalities in regards to resources, cultural practices, and levels of education to name a few. It also allowed for the sharing of the unique insights, expertise, and wisdom of young people. This project attempted to give effect to the general principles of non-discrimination and participation, as well as an anticolonial approach, to overcome the imbalances of power across contexts, lived experiences, and intergenerational roles, while recognizing the influential roles of children as the sociology of childhood affirms. Bridging these multiple divides requires resources and recognition of young people's needs and contribution, in order to respect their right to participation (Oliveras et al., 2018). In the ICCRP project this involved dedicated time, project budget, perseverance and, importantly, the openness to create spaces for dialogue, and adapt to different contexts and the expressed needs of children and youth, such that children's participation rights could be respected. It slows the process but enriches it insurmountably.

The ICCRP experience in this project points to the potential for dialogue between adult researchers and young people to enhance the ethical dimensions of the research. This is particularly important given tensions in the current systems of ethical regulation, highlighted by the integral and dynamic role of the CYAC in the project. While such regulation is critically important, the current mechanisms, at times, serve to further marginalise children and youth. The requirement for ethical approval prior to even approaching children and youth provides serious challenges to coproduction, especially during conceptualisation, and highlights power imbalances and age discrimination, particularly when considering that such requirements are not encountered in the formation of adult expert advisory groups.

There have been many challenges but taking the time to engage in dialogue with the members of the CYAC has meant that the ICCRP could address them in creative ways in partnership. At times there was a disconnection between the intentions and expectations of the adult researchers and the CYAC members, which was challenging and required working together to move forward. Such challenges are inherent in research, regardless of whether the participants and advisors are young people or adults. A willingness to engage in dialogue is key to a reflexive response, which the ICCRP would argue should be a core part of any research education and training for those engaging in research.

While the ICCRP does not claim to have all the 'solutions' to address international CYAC challenges, it is anticipated that the complexity of the challenges may resonate with other researchers, and hope that the creative responses and lessons learnt can support other child and youth advisory bodies in research at both the local and global levels. A number of divides exist, such as, between the expectations of the different parties involved, and between formal ethics requirements and the realities of children and youth's participation in research. Indeed, there was even a divide in terms of assumptions about the reach of technology to support communication and the realities encountered. Experiences with the CYAC point to the

importance of dialogue between adult researchers and children and youth to help bridge such divides. Moving forward, the ICCRP will continue to explore creative ways of involving the CYAC members in team meetings, which are accessible and stimulating to CYAC members and adult researchers alike.

The partnership's experiences resonate with recent literature in highlighting the importance of dialogue and a reflexive approach for progressing ethical research (Abebe & Bessell, 2014; Graham et al., 2013; Skovdal & Abebe, 2012), along with recognition of the complexities, challenges and immense rewards inherent in children and youth's participation in advisory roles (Jones et al. 2018; McCarry, 2011; Moore et al. 2016). Such advisory groups can be a site for co-reflexivity, whereby researchers and young people can reflect critically on the underlying assumptions, power imbalances and constrictions, and research design and processes, to help shape and inform ethical research practice (Mercieca & Jones, 2018; Moore et al., 2016). The challenges encountered served as a catalyst for dialogue between adult researchers and young people, through which the CYAC members directly added to the research agenda and influenced the research design and process. In such ways, the experiences of participation were meaningful for all involved.

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[1] The terms Global South and Global North are used in this article. While we recognise that the dichotomy is not always appropriate, the use of these terms reflect ICCRP's critical approach to participation and adult-child power relations. Participation is a global concern with geo-political connotations. We recognize the unique historical, political, economic, social, and cultural realities of the four countries – Brazil, Canada, China and South Africa -- involved in this study. Global South contexts reflect their specific legacies of colonialism, poverty, inequalities and intersectional challenges (e.g. UN Research Institute for Social Development, 2010). The majority of Child and Youth Advisory Committee members originate and live in the Global South, which creates a space for many different perspectives to be shared as well as the potential for some common lessons about participation and participation in research to be drawn.

[2] Generally, this article uses the phrase 'children and youth', in recognition that older children often prefer to be referred to as youth or young people. This terminology reflects the definitions of 'children' in the UNCRC (generally those under the age of 18), and 'youth' from the United Nations (n.d.) (for all those between 15 to 24 years of age), while recognizing the overlap between these categories. It is noted however that the literature is often more restricted to considering participation of those under 18 years of age.

[3] Coproduction in research is an approach in which there is collaboration between researchers and others (practitioners and/or participants) in the production of knowledge, with the aims of more equal relationships, reducing power imbalances, mutual learning and genuine participation.

[4] Further information on the project can be found on the website ryerson.ca/iccrp or https://icpnc.org/publications-and-resources/international-and-canadian-child-rights-partnership-iccrp/

[5] However, a group of children and youth, supported by ICCRP project partner, provided advice on the methods to be used with other children and youth.

[6] The above content was shaped by the guidance and contributions of CYAC members. Note that all CYAC members identified within this paper asked for and consented to having their names included in this journal article.

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